Full text of the speech made by His Excellency President Gotabaya Rajapaksa on 73rd Independence Day – February 4, 2021

Today marks the 73rd anniversary of our nation gaining independence from colonial rule. On this day we pay our respects to all the leaders from the Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim, Burgher and other sections of the population who made various sacrifices to win our independence.

I also pay my tribute to the brave war heroes who sacrificed their lives and underwent great hardships to preserve our nation's independence and sovereignty.

We have faced many challenges as a nation in the 73 years since our independence. From time to time, we have had to face religious and ethnic conflicts, racist and terrorist activities, undue external influences, constitutional crises, and many other obstacles. The challenges of establishing national security, achieving true reconciliation amongst various communities of our nation, and building a strong economy that can deliver sustainable economic development and eliminate poverty still lie ahead of us.

At a juncture when our nation's heritage, its traditions, its national identity and patriotism were under serious threat, more than 6.9 million people elected me as President to provide the leadership needed to reestablish national security and overcome the many challenges facing our country.

I am a Sinhala Buddhist leader and I will never hesitate to state so. I govern this country in accordance with Buddhist teachings. Within the Buddhist philosophic tradition of peaceful coexistence which gives due respect to all religions and ethnicities, every person in this country irrespective of his or her ethnic or religious identification has the right to enjoy the freedom as equals under the nation's legal framework.

Traitorous elements always band together and seek to marshal domestic and foreign forces against the leadership that upholds indigenous way of life and country's sovereignty. Such elements mislead the public through false propaganda in a subtle way. I request the people of our nation to always think critically before acting. If people make assessments based on facts and take

decisions only after finding out the truth, no one will be able to mislead the public.

The public has given the current Government a mandate to execute the policies articulated in my vision statement “Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour”.

I have sworn as the nation’s leader to always protect our nation’s independence, unitary status, territorial integrity and sovereignty on behalf of our future generations. I will always uphold that pledge.

Sri Lanka is a democratic nation. Every citizen who lives in this country has equal rights. We reject any efforts to divide our citizens based on ethnic or religious reasons. We always strive to protect the fundamental rights and human rights of all our citizens, and always stand for the principle of one nation, one law.

We always respect the rule of law. The public has rejected the undue influence that was exerted on law enforcement agencies and the judiciary by politicians in the past. However, the public also expects fair, unbiased and efficient service from the officials who enforce the law. As such, I have advised the Attorney General’s Department to swiftly act upon matters that have caused great concern to the public, such as the Easter Sunday Attacks and the Central Bank scam.

I have now received the final report of the Presidential Commission appointed to inquire into the Easter Sunday Attacks. I have already given instructions to implement its recommendations. Simultaneously, taking into account the recommendations of the previous Parliament’s Sectoral Oversight Committee on National Security, action will be taken against all parties involved in this tragedy. We will not allow those responsible for designing and enabling this tragedy to escape justice. We will never allow extremism to raise its head again, in this country.

At a time when the entire world is in crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic, our country has had to face many challenges. For more than a year, the pandemic has posed serious obstacles to carrying out the development activities and for people of our country to lead a normal life.

Several countries have by now successfully developed vaccines for the COVID-19 virus. I have requested the leaders of India, China and Russia to support Sri Lanka to swiftly obtain these vaccines. This matter has also been discussed with the World Health Organization. Accordingly, we have obtained one vaccine and have already started our vaccination programme. This vaccination programme will be carried out without any disruption.

An important lesson learnt by all nations faced with the prevailing global crisis has been the need for a strong domestic production base. This experience has further underscored the appropriateness and timeliness of our policy of strengthening domestic agriculture to ensure food security and self-sufficiency.

The stimulus provided through distribution of free fertilizer, raising the floor price of paddy to 50 rupees, striking off the debts of farmers, reconstructing thousands of irrigation tanks around the country, and the encouragement provided to home gardening and urban farming has revived the agriculture sector. We will act to further increase agricultural productivity through the infusion of new technologies. We are already seeing the benefits of strengthening farmers through managing import taxes to encourage the production of paddy, maize, grains, potatoes and onions; by limiting imports of products such as turmeric which can be grown domestically and by limiting the re-export of spices such as pepper. Domestic production has increased, and export opportunities have expanded.

I have always maintained that in order to strengthen farmers economically we must encourage them to become agricultural entrepreneurs. It is our aim to further develop and strengthen the domestic agriculture sector so that it becomes a significant foreign exchange earner.

We have not forgotten the importance of the industrial and service sectors in economic development. The Government has taken action to encourage these sectors through the provision of tax incentives and by reducing interest rates. A great improvement is already visible in traditional handicrafts such as batik, cane, clay and jewellery through the state ministries that were established for this purpose.

We have paid attention to provide entrepreneurs engaged in small and medium enterprises as well as those who are self-employed avenues in minimizing delays in various approvals they require, in helping them to access financing at single digit interest rates and in obtaining required training.

Providing stimulus to the construction industry has been shown to be a successful means of reviving stalled economies. Initiatives such as the 100,000 kilometer roads programme; the 10,000 bridges programme; the reconstruction of thousands of irrigation tanks around the country under the 'Irrigation Prosperity' programme; the programme to construct 14,000 houses under the theme of 'one village, one house'; the creation of 100,000 housing units for middle income earners, low income earners and urban shanty dwellers; the programme to construct 4,000 houses for estate workers; and the construction of walkways for densely populated areas around the country will provide great benefits to the public at large whilst directly supporting the revival of the economy.

Amidst striving to develop the agriculture, industrial and service sectors to strengthen the national economy, we are also taking steps to minimize obstacles to the promotion of foreign direct investments. While our policy of not selling national economic hubs to foreigners remains unchanged, I trust that the public will critically assess the misinformation and misinterpretations being propagated by those with ulterior political motives to deter foreign investors from investing in Sri Lanka.

I have established a Presidential Deregulation Commission to change the outdated laws and regulations that affect the general public as well as the domestic and foreign companies. This long discussed but unimplemented activity has finally commenced. I believe that implementing the recommendations of this Commission will provide significant impetus to the country's future economic development.

The 21st Century is considered as the Knowledge Century.

Human resources are extremely important to the development of the nation. The "Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour" policy statement articulates the need for educational reforms to foster a knowledgeable and skilled future generation.

Accordingly, a separate State Ministry has been created to undertake the reforms needed in the education sector. Two task forces have also been created to obtain specialist assistance for these reforms. The recommendations they have provided are already being implemented.

During the course of this year, the number of students gaining admission to universities will increase by 10,000, or 30 percent. Provisions have been made to double the number of students entering the state Technical Colleges from 100,000 to 200,000. Approval has been granted for the creation of a system of city universities catering to every district in order to increase the capacity of universities. We are acting quickly to implement recommendations for educational reforms. As a result, we anticipate that there will be an appreciable qualitative improvement in the education sector within the next few years.

In order to fulfil our economic ambitions in the modern world, we must foster a society familiar with technology.

In order to compete in the future, the agriculture, industrial and service sectors will need to be infused with technology. To support this, we look forward to fostering a culture of technological innovation that will uplift the living standards of the people.

In accordance with the policies contained in the “Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour” vision statement, the Government will encourage innovation through the use of technology in both the public and the private sectors. With this in mind, a range of tax incentives has already been provided to the technology intensive sectors.

In recent weeks, I established a dedicated Ministry of Technology and brought it under my purview. Through this Ministry, due attention will be paid to developing the policies and legal framework required to improve the technology sector, as well as to simplify the functioning of the state sector and markets through the use of information technology as a tool for broader digital governance. Action has already been taken to create five technology parks with all facilities in five identified districts in order to encourage entrepreneurs and start-ups in the technology sector. We will have an opportunity to create a revival in the technology sector through such incentives.

I request the intelligent public to remember that all of this has been achieved in little over a year, whilst facing the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that has debilitated the entire world.

Our tourism industry earned approximately US$ 4.5 billion annually and provided direct and indirect employment to three million people. These people are now in great difficulty as they are unable to make a living from tourism. We need to find solutions for these people as soon as possible. As such, whilst strictly adhering to health recommendations, we have acted to restart the tourism industry in a phased manner.

I have always loved and respected the environment. In the past, whilst serving as the Secretary to the Ministry of Urban Development, I strove to protect the environment when undertaking such activities as urban beautification, urban development, and the creation of walking paths and urban parks. Today, too, our Government has paid particular attention to preserving the environment for future generations. What the creation of urban forests, designing of green cities, promotion of green businesses, undertaking of nationwide tree planting programmes, reconstruction of irrigation tanks and canals, recultivating of fallow paddy fields, promoting the use of organic fertilizer, and limiting the use of plastics demonstrate is the implementation of this sustainable environmental management policy.

The foundation of our citizen centric economic policy is that the true potential of the economy cannot be unleashed without economic freedom. To achieve the Government’s aims of eliminating poverty, providing equal opportunity for improvement of all citizens, and developing domestic businesses, we require a clean and efficient public service.

The public service is a powerful, nationwide mechanism. This represents an opportunity that many countries in the world do not possess. Therefore, I expect this powerful mechanism to make a significant contribution to the national decision making process. However, I observe that weaknesses currently prevail in decision making at every level. Even on very simple institutional matters, I have observed that officials avoid making decisions and refer them to the Cabinet of Ministers. They expect advice from circulars for every activity.

They avoid taking decisions even within the limits of their authority. If we do not change this situation, it will be extremely difficult for us to take this nation forward.

The legal reforms necessary to protect those in the public service who take correct decisions are currently being formulated. I therefore request all those in positions of authority to ease the limitations and practices that obstruct the general public through the state administration.

I personally participate in the 'Conversation with the Village' programme because rural development is one of my Government's priorities. The public administration system at both the District and Divisional level is extremely important to achieving the citizen centric economic development articulated in my vision statement "Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour". There is a clear responsibility incumbent on everyone involved in this development process, from the Governors, District Secretaries, Divisional Secretaries and Public Health Officials, to officials such as Grama Niladharis, Samurdhi Officials, Agriculture Research and Production Assistants, Family Health Service Officials and Development Officials at the village level. They have all provided tremendous support in controlling the spread of the COVID-19 virus and in providing other essential services. Similarly, I look forward to the unstinted support of all public servants in successfully overcoming the challenges that confront us in terms of our economic development.

The political leadership has a grave responsibility not only on matters at the national level but also in rural development. We have instituted mechanisms to ensure the active participation of Cabinet and State Ministers, Members of Parliament, and Members of Urban and Municipal Councils in the development activities at District and Divisional levels.

Corruption and waste are significant obstacles to a nation's development. We are setting an example to eradicate corruption and waste in the public administration. We will not be lenient on anyone who is found guilty of corruption or waste. However, one of the difficulties we face in preventing corruption is the indirect support given willingly or unwillingly by the public to such activities. I request the general public not to encourage corruption either directly or indirectly. If anyone is found to be engaging in corrupt practices, please inform the relevant authorities.

I invite everyone to join in a national effort to mobilize public opinion against corruption and waste. Our future generations too must be educated in this regard. I appreciate the support that is being extended by the media for this initiative.

Various parties claim that they worked to ensure my election as President. That may be true. People from every section of society gathered around me to support my campaign. I believe that the vast majority of these people did so not in search of personal benefits but because they expected me to serve the nation diligently. I am always prepared to fulfil the genuine expectations of the public that supported me with honest intent. However, I will never take decisions that will damage the country and to please those who seek gains for themselves personally or for their businesses.

Throughout history, strong civilizations were built and nations developed by those who worked on targets by looking positively towards the future. At this juncture, our nations' development requires precisely that kind of vision.

No contribution can be expected from pessimists and those who do nothing but criticize the work of others.

What we require today is the support of citizens with a positive vision, who love their country, who contribute to society, and who do not make unfair criticism but offers practical solutions to the issues we face.

We are committed to achieve the principle of the 'productive citizen, happy family, disciplined and ethical society, and prosperous nation'. If the majority of citizens in this country provide their due contribution towards this, we can make this principle a reality. I therefore once again request all the citizens of this country to think positively and join with us to build the future for all our children.

I am the leader that you searched for. I will discharge the responsibility you have entrusted to me, with commitment and dedication.

May the blessings of the noble Triple Gem be with you.

Thank you.